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Origins of Written Hebrew

The Epigraphic and Linguistic Context of the Mosaic Law in 1450 BC

Chronological Anchors and the Archaeological Horizon of the Late Bronze Age

To evaluate the linguistic and orthographic medium of the Mosaic Law around 1450 BC, the historical investigator must establish the chronological and archaeological coordinates of the Late Bronze Age I (LBA I). A conservative historical framework, derived from 1 Kings 6:1, dates the Exodus to approximately 1446 BC by calculating back 480 years from the fourth regnal year of King Solomon in 966 BC . This mid-15th-century chronology places the wilderness wanderings and the reception of the Law between 1446 BC and 1406 BC . It is supported by various biblical passages, including the 300-year span mentioned in Judges 11:26–27, the historical recollections in Acts 13:19–20, and the generational records in 1 Chronicles 6:33–38 .

The archaeological record of the mid-second millennium BC reveals a highly integrated Levant under Egyptian administrative influence, which matches the historical background of the early Israelite narrative . Rather than being an isolated tribal group, the Semitic populations of this era operated within a network of major urban centers, military encampments, and trade routes .

Archaeological Artifact / Site	Estimated Historical Date	Key Epigraphic or Cultural Significance
Avaris (Palaces F and G)	Mid-15th century BC	Monumental palatial architecture dating to the exact historical window of the early Moses narrative .
Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446	Middle Kingdom (c. 18th century BC)	A historical slave registry listing ninety-five household servants, several of whom bear distinct Semitic and Hebrew-equivalent names .
Serabit el-Khadim (Sinai 346)	c. 1450 BC	Early alphabetic mining inscriptions featuring West Semitic divine descriptors such as *'El* ("God") and "the One who is exalted" .

Archaeological Artifact / Site	Estimated Historical Date	Key Epigraphic or Cultural Significance
The Soleb Inscription	Reign of Amenhotep III (c. 1400 BC)	An Egyptian temple topographical list identifying the nomadic territory of "the land of the Shasu of YHW" .
The Berlin Pedestal Relief 21687	Pre-13th century BC	A damaged Egyptian name-ring reconstructed to read "Ishrael," indicating an early national presence in Canaan prior to the Merneptah Stele .
The Merneptah Stele	c. 1208 BC	A monumental victory granite stele explicitly designating "Israel" as an established foreign people group within the southern Levant .

These discoveries provide physical evidence of a literate, distinct West Semitic population moving between Egypt, the Sinai, and Canaan during the second millennium BC . This challenges 19th-century theories, such as the early formulations of the Documentary Hypothesis, which assumed that alphabetic writing did not exist during the Mosaic era and that the Pentateuch must have been composed centuries later .

Scribe Demographics and the Nile-Sinai Writing Continuum

The historical training of an elite scribe in the mid-15th century BC would have occurred within the scribal schools of the Egyptian court or the diplomatic administrative centers of the Levant . A figure raised in Pharaoh's household, such as Moses, would have been educated in Egyptian administrative, diplomatic, and literary scripts . This education would have focused primarily on logo-syllabic Egyptian Hieroglyphs and cursive Hieratic, along with Akkadian Cuneiform, which was the international diplomatic medium of the ancient Near East .

This educational background is reflected in the early biblical text through distinct Egyptian loanwords and literary structures . For instance, in the narrative of infant Moses, the term used for "river" is not the standard West Semitic or Hebrew word *nahar*, but rather the transliterated Egyptian word *itrw*, which represents the Nile .

However, a significant linguistic transition occurs between the patriarchal period described in Genesis and the national period described in Exodus .

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Patriarchal Era (Middle Bronze Age, c. 2100–1800 BC)
  └──── Northwest Semitic is primarily an unwritten, spoken dialect
  └──── Genesis records no use of the verb *katab* ("to write")
  └──── Written records are limited to foreign cuneiform or hieroglyphic systems

Mosaic Era (Late Bronze Age, c. 1450 BC)
  └──── National organization requires a shared, accessible script
  └──── First biblical use of the verb *katab* ("to write") in Exodus 17:14
  └──── Scribes utilize the newly developed linear alphabetic script
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This "writing gap" is supported by lexical distribution in the text . The Hebrew verb *katab* ("to write") occurs 262 times in the Old Testament but never in the book of Genesis; its first appearance is in Exodus 17:14 . Similarly, the term *sepher* ("scroll" or "written record") occurs 187 times in the Old Testament, but only once in Genesis (Genesis 5:1, which may have been written down later), before appearing regularly starting in Exodus 17:14 .

This shift matches the historical development of the early alphabet . During the patriarchal era, Northwest Semitic was primarily an unwritten language . By the time of the Exodus, however, a simplified linear alphabetic script had emerged in the Sinai Peninsula and the southern Levant, providing a practical way to record lengthy legal and historical texts .

The Epigraphy of Serabit el-Khadim and the Birth of the Alphabet

The birth of the alphabet is documented at the site of Serabit el-Khadim in the southwestern Sinai, where Semitic miners worked alongside Egyptian mining expeditions . Pioneering excavations by Flinders Petrie uncovered a series of simple, routine monuments of everyday life, along with votive objects inscribed in a previously unknown script . This script, termed Proto-Sinaitic, was composed of linear, pictographic signs derived directly from Egyptian hieroglyphic models .

The writing system operated on the acrophonic principle, which translated Egyptian pictographs into West Semitic phonetic equivalents :

- **The Letter Mem:** Scribes took the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign for water (nt in Egyptian) and assigned it the Semitic name for water, $*maym$ or $*mu$. This acrophonically isolated the initial consonant sound, establishing the letter $/m/$, which eventually became the Phoenician and Hebrew *mem* .
- **The Letter Resh:** Scribes took the Egyptian head-in-profile hieroglyph (sign D1, read as tp in Egyptian) and assigned it the Semitic word for head, $*ra\text{'}sh$. This isolated the initial consonant $/r/$, which became the letter *resh* .
- **The Letter Lamed:** Scribes took the Egyptian shepherd's staff (sign S39) to represent the Semitic $/l/$ sound, creating the letter *lamed* .
- **The Letter Samekh:** Scribes converted Semitic pictographic equivalents to represent the sibilant $/s/$ sound, which is preserved in its earliest known linear form on the 12th-century BC potsherd from Lachish .

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[Egyptian Hieroglyph] ———> [Semitic Name of Object] ———> [Acrophonic Initial Consonant]
  (e.g., Water: "nt")       (e.g., Water: "*mu")        (e.g., Phonemic Value: /m/)
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This simplified writing system stood in sharp contrast to the elite, complex logo-syllabic scripts of Egypt and Mesopotamia . It democratized literacy, making it possible for ordinary people, rather than just a specialized class of scribes, to learn and use the script .

Early alphabetic writing coexisted with different sorting sequences . By the late second millennium, Semitic scribes utilized two distinct alphabetic orders: the familiar $'abgad$ sequence (which matches the Hebrew order and is attested in Ugaritic and early Levantine scripts) and the alternative $halaḥam$ sequence (attested on the Beth Shemesh tablet and in South Arabian scripts) .

The Linguistic Debate: Hebrew versus Canaanite in Proto-Sinaitic

While scholars agree that Proto-Sinaitic represents the earliest stage of the alphabet, they remain divided on its exact linguistic classification . This debate centers on whether the language underlying these inscriptions should be classified as a distinct, early form of Hebrew or as a broader, standardized West Semitic (Canaanite) language .

The Proto-Hebrew Decipherment Model

Proponents of an early Hebrew classification, such as Douglas Petrovich, argue that Hebrew is the underlying language of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions . This model proposes that Semitic Israelites living in Egypt developed the alphabet during the Middle Kingdom and used it to record their history .

Petrovich's translations of Middle and New Kingdom inscriptions identify several biblical names, including:

- **Asenath (Sinai 376):** Translated as referring posthumously to the "house of the vineyard of Asenath," the wife of Joseph (Genesis 41:45) .
- **Ahisamach (Sinai 375a):** Translated as naming Ahisamach, the father of the tabernacle artisan Oholiab (Exodus 31:6), with the title "Overseer of Minerals" .
- **Moses (Sinai 361):** Translated as a complaint about "bound servitude" that "lingered," noting that "Moses provoked astonishment" . This inscription is associated with Sinai 360, which features a "serpent" motif that may connect to the account in Exodus 4:2-4 .

Additionally, Petrovich argues that the original Proto-Sinaitic alphabet consisted of 22 letters, matching the classical Hebrew consonantal inventory . This challenges the consensus view that the early alphabet had a larger set of consonants .

The Common Canaanite Consensus Model

The prevailing consensus among Semitic epigraphers, represented by Christopher Rollston and others, rejects the identification of Proto-Sinaitic as "Hebrew" . They argue that the language of these

inscriptions is best described as an early Canaanite dialect, which was ancestral to Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Ugaritic .

Linguistic / Epigraphic Feature	Petrovich's Proto-Hebrew Model	Rollston's Common Canaanite Model
Consonantal Inventory	22 consonantal signs, matching the standard Hebrew alphabet .	27 consonantal signs, reflecting the phonology of Proto-Semitic .
Diagnostic Vocabulary	Identifies specific Hebrew names (*Asenath*, *Ahisamach*, *Moses*) and distinct roots .	Identifies only "Common Semitic" words (*'El*, *rb*, *yyn*, *'br*) found across multiple languages .
Gemination Rules	Allows consonants to be written once but pronounced twice across word boundaries (e.g., *gb [b]itu*) .	Rejects cross-boundary gemination as grammatically incorrect; gemination occurs only internally within words .
Direction of Writing	Standardized early, with uniform readings that establish historical-biblical narratives .	Multidirectional (left-to-right, right-to-left, columnar); distinct Paleo-Hebrew is uniformly right-to-left .

Critics of the early Hebrew model argue that the words identified as Hebrew are actually Common Semitic terms . For example, the root rb ("great" or "big"), the word $\mathrm{'El}$ or $\mathrm{'l}$ ("God"), and the word for "wine" (yyn) are common to Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Old South Arabic . Even the root $\mathrm{'br}$ ("to cross over"), which is the etymological basis for "Hebrew" (*'Ivri*), is widely used across the Semitic language family and is not unique to Hebrew .

Furthermore, philologists criticize Petrovich's grammatical reconstructions . His translation of Sinai 115 relies on a proposed "doubling" or gemination rule where a single written letter $\langle B \rangle$ is pronounced twice across a word boundary to read *gb [b]itu* ("earth-god's house") .

Linguists note that gemination does not create a consonant that is written once but pronounced twice across word boundaries . In phonetic transcription, a geminated consonant is a single, lengthened segment (represented as $[\mathrm{b\colon}]$) that occurs entirely within word boundaries, making cross-boundary gemination grammatically unsupported .

Finally, the 27-consonant inventory of Proto-Sinaitic is well-attested . This richer phonetic inventory matches the Proto-Semitic language . When Hebrew adopted the 22-letter Phoenician alphabet centuries later, it was forced to compress multiple phonemes into single letters, such as using the letter *shin* ($\backslash\mathrm{unicode}x05e9$) to represent both the $/v/$ and $/s/$ sounds . This phonetic compression indicates that the 27-letter Proto-Sinaitic script represents a broader, ancestral Canaanite linguistic stage .

Orthographic Evolution of the Northwest Semitic Text

The transition of the alphabet from its pictographic origins in the second millennium BC to the standardized scripts of the first millennium BC highlights the changing nature of Semitic writing .

During the mid-second millennium BC, early alphabetic writing was highly fluid . Inscribed texts were written in various directions, including left-to-right (dextrograde), right-to-left (sinistrograde), and vertically in columns . The signs themselves retained their pictographic forms, as seen on the Ophel Pithos and other early Levantine inscriptions where the letter *resh* was still drawn as a detailed head in profile .

This writing also lacked any representation of vowel sounds . Scribes wrote in a pure *scriptio defectiva*, omitting vowel indicators entirely .

Vowels were only introduced later through *matres lectionis* ("mothers of reading"), where certain consonantal letters (א, h, w, y) were used to represent vowel sounds . This practice developed from phonetic changes, such as when the diphthong $/bayt/$ contracted to the long vowel $/bêt/$. The historical consonant letter $\langle y \rangle$ was preserved in the written text, eventually becoming a marker for the long $/e/$ vowel .

The use of these vowel letters varied by region :

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Orthographic Vowel Representation (Matres Lectionis)
  ├──── Sam'al (Southern Anatolia): Vowel letters used only in word-final positions
  ├──── Central Syria: Vowel letters used word-finally and occasionally word-internally
  ├──── Tell Fekheriyeh (Eastern Syria): Vowel letters used for both word-final and word
-internal long vowels
  └──── Judean Hebrew: Adopted final vowel letters early on, with internal vowel letters
added gradually
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At the end of the second millennium BC, the Phoenicians standardized the alphabet . They reduced the character set to 22 linear letters, established a uniform right-to-left writing direction, and stabilized the letter forms .

During the early Iron Age, regional variants of this standardized alphabet began to diverge . According to excavations in the Shephelah, the alphabet remained uniform until the 9th century BC, when distinct regional characteristics emerged .

A distinct Paleo-Hebrew alphabet (*Ketav Ivri*) became distinguishable from the Phoenician and Aramaic scripts between 880 BC and 830 BC . This script was used in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, as seen in the Siloam Inscription (c. 700 BC) and the Gezer Calendar .

Following the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BC, the Jewish people adopted the square Imperial Aramaic script, which was known as *Ketav Ashuri* (Assyrian script) . By the 3rd century BC, this square block script had become the standard medium for copying sacred Hebrew texts, while the Samaritans preserved their Pentateuch in a variant of the older Paleo-Hebrew script .

Sages and Scripts: Talmudic Philology of Sanhedrin 21b

The historical shift from the Paleo-Hebrew script (*Ketav Ivri*) to the square Aramaic script (*Ketav Ashuri*) is a central topic of discussion in classical rabbinic literature, particularly in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b–22a) . The sages present different opinions on which script was used to write the original copy of the Torah .

- **The Opinion of Mar Zutra and R. Jose:** They assert that the Torah was originally given in *Ketav Ivri* . They argue that the script was changed to *Ketav Ashuri* in the Persian period by Ezra the Scribe, acting under divine guidance . This change is associated with Deuteronomy 17:18, where the king is instructed to write a "copy of the Torah" (*mishnei hatorah*), which the sages interpret as a "changed Torah" . Under this view, *Ketav Ivri* was left to the Samaritans, while the Jewish community adopted the refined *Ketav Ashuri* .
- **The Opinion of Rebbi (Rabbi Judah the Prince):** He maintains that the Torah was originally given in *Ketav Ashuri* . He argues that because of the nation's sins, the script was temporarily changed to *Ketav Ivri* (called *roetz*) . When the people repented, the original *Ketav Ashuri* was restored to them .
- **The Opinion of R. Elazar of Modi'in:** He asserts that the writing system of the Torah was never altered, maintaining that both the original Tablets and the subsequent prophetic copies were written in *Ketav Ashuri* .

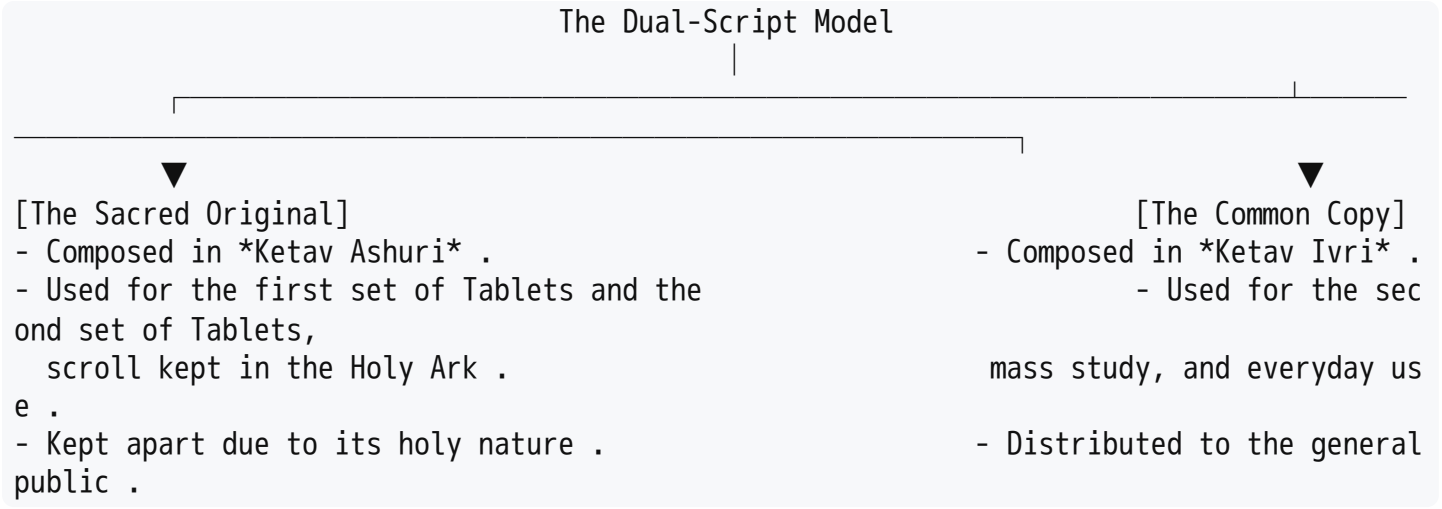
A key part of this debate involves the physical design of the Tablets of the Covenant . The Talmudic sage Rav Chisda notes that the letters on the Tablets were engraved completely through the stone from one side to the other .

Because the letters *samekh* ($\unicode{x05e1}$) and the final *mem* ($\unicode{x05dd}$) are completely closed characters in the square *Ketav Ashuri* script, the central piece of stone inside these letters had no physical connection to the rest of the Tablet . Rav Chisda concludes that these central stones must have been held in place miraculously .

However, this argument applies only to the square *Ketav Ashuri* script . In the older *Ketav Ivri*, neither the *mem* nor the *samekh* are closed letters .

Conversely, the Jerusalem Talmud records an alternative tradition stating that the letter *ayin* ($\unicode{x05e2}$) held the miraculous central stone . This alternative tradition points to *Ketav Ivri*, where the letter *ayin* is drawn as a closed circle ($\unicode{x2012}$), whereas in *Ketav Ashuri* it is an open character .

To resolve these conflicting traditions, medieval commentators such as the Ritva (Rabbi Yom Tov al-Ishbili) and the Maharal of Prague proposed a dual-script model :


The Dual-Script Model
[The Sacred Original]
- Composed in *Ketav Ashuri* .
- Used for the first set of Tablets and the second set of Tablets,
scroll kept in the Holy Ark .
- Kept apart due to its holy nature .
[The Common Copy]
- Composed in *Ketav Ivri* .
- Used for the mass study, and everyday use .
- Distributed to the general public .

This dual-script model suggests that both writing systems existed in some form during the Mosaic period . It proposes that the sacred *Ketav Ashuri* was reserved for divine and official documents, while the linear *Ketav Ivri* was used by the general population for everyday writing and study .

Conclusions: The Scriptorium of Mount Sinai

Evaluating the historical and epigraphical evidence from the Late Bronze Age I indicates that if the Mosaic Law was recorded around 1450 BC, it would have been written in a Northwest Semitic dialect closely related to early Hebrew, using the Proto-Sinaitic (Proto-Canaanite) linear alphabetic script .

The text would have been written in a pure *scriptio defectiva* without any vowel markers, using a continuous script that lacked word divisions or punctuation . It would have utilized the larger 27-consonant inventory of the early alphabet, written in fluid, multidirectional orientations .

The classical Biblical Hebrew preserved in the modern Masoretic Text is written in a first-millennium BC language and script . This indicates that the biblical text was updated orthographically over centuries of transmission . Scribes copied the archaic second-millennium BC records into the 22-letter Paleo-Hebrew script during the monarchic period, added *matres lectionis* to clarify pronunciation, and eventually transliterated the texts into the square *Ketav Ashuri* script after the Babylonian exile .

This scribal process preserved the historical content of the original mid-second millennium BC texts while updating their spelling and script to ensure the Law remained readable for successive generations .

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